

# NEGOTIATING BLACK SELF-HATE WITHIN THE LDS CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

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*“Our living prophet, President David O. McKay, has said, ‘The seeming discrimination by the Church toward the Negro is not something which originated with man; but goes back into the beginning with God.’”*

*—First Presidency statement, December 15, 1969<sup>2</sup>*

It has been forty years since the landmark decision by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to end its long-standing restriction on people of African descent from full participation and recognition as worthy spiritual beings in a majority white religion. Since the ban on Black priesthood ordination was lifted in June 1978, subsequently allowing every worthy Black male access to its lay priesthood and all Black men and women their temple ordinances, the Church has made small strides and modest growth in the expansion of its Black urban membership. It is hard to know for certain the exact number of Black members in the Church, as the institution purportedly does not keep records based on racial demographics; however, in 2009, the Pew Research Center estimated that around 3 percent of US Mormons are Black.<sup>3</sup>

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2. First Presidency statement, Dec. 15, 1969, available at BlackLDS.org, <http://www.blacklds.org/1969-first-presidency-statement>.

3. “A Portrait of Mormons in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, July 24, 2009, <http://www.pewforum>.

Given this dearth of Black membership, high-ranking Church officials have purposefully engaged in public awareness campaigns in Los Angeles; Washington, DC; Harlem; and New York City.<sup>4</sup> And utilizing its vast media resources, Church leadership worked to undo the Church's image as a racist faith tradition hostile to Black people. The "I'm a Mormon" print and television ad campaign led by Church public relations was another attempt to represent the Church as multicultural by highlighting a few Black faces. But, as the Tony Award-winning musical *The Book of Mormon* demonstrated in its satirical portrayal of the LDS Church's racial ignorance, stereotypes die hard. And if the Broadway production and its lampooning of anti-Black Mormon attitudes is any indication of how the greater public views those in the fold, the battle to increase the number of Blacks will remain a difficult undertaking.

The question remains: why would any self-aware Black person find Mormonism the least bit appealing given its ignoble history of racial exclusion and marginalization? In fact, white male Church leadership is notorious for sidelining any individual or group that poses a threat to its established order of truth-making from groups like Native Americans, the LGBTQ+ community, disaffected Mormons, and politically progressive members.<sup>5</sup> This paper is intended as a theoretical analysis into the complex issue of religious identity and internalized oppression in the lives of Black members of the conservative LDS Church, as these devout

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org/2009/07/24/a-portrait-of-mormons-in-the-us.

4. Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

5. See, for example, Kristen Moulton, "Kelly on Excommunication from Mormon Church: 'I've Done Nothing Wrong,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 24, 2014, <http://archive.sltrib.com/story.php?ref=/sltrib/news/58104587-78/women-kelly-church-ordain.html.csp>; and Laurie Goodstein, "Mormon Church Threatens Critic with Excommunication," *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/us/john-dehlin-mormon-critic-facing-excommunication.html>.

individuals struggle to find validation, a voice, and equal representation within a space they hold so dear.

### Introduction: Racial Battle Fatigue

Throughout US history, Black Americans have long been required to seek the approval of whites in order to gain some semblance of economic, political, and material advantage. Post-civil rights assimilation did not improve racial matters beyond superficial changes and the gospel of colorblindness spoken in public spaces.<sup>6</sup> The ongoing attempt to desegregate America did, however, bring many African Americans in closer proximity with implicit and explicit racial bias and mistreatment at the hands of mostly white Americans.<sup>7</sup>

Since the election of Barack Obama (and particularly through Donald Trump's salacious campaign and stunning victory in 2016), polls from reliable sources have consistently shown a growing tension over the state of US race relations.<sup>8</sup> This anxiety is most acutely felt among

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6. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

7. Darron T. Smith, "Images of Black Males in Popular Media," *Huffington Post*, Mar. 14, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/Black-men-media\\_b\\_2844990.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/Black-men-media_b_2844990.html); Hugh Honour, *From the American Revolution to World War I, part 1: Slaves and Liberators*, vol. 4 of *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, edited by David Bindman, Henry Louise Gates, and Karen C. C. Dalton (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Adam Waytz, Kelly Marie Hoffman, and Sophie Trawalter, "A Superhumanization Bias in Whites' Perceptions of Blacks," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6, no. 3 (2015): 352–59.

8. See Eugene Scott, "Most Americans Say Race Relations Are a Major Problem, but Few Discuss it with Friends and Family," *Washington Post*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/05/31/most-americans-say-race-relations-are-a-major-problem-but-few-discuss-it-with-friends-and-family>; and Ryan Struyk, "Blacks and Whites See Racism in the United States Very, Very Differently," *CNN Politics*, Aug. 18, 2017,

working-class white Americans who feel their white-skin privilege slipping away with the encroachment of racial diversity.<sup>9</sup> Hence, behind the polarizing moniker “Make America Great Again” is this unfounded racial fear that drove many whites to cast their ballot for an open and unapologetic bigot. Whether it is “sitting at Starbucks while Black,” “barbecuing while Black,” or “kneeling while Black,” Black folk remain the object of white contempt and scorn.<sup>10</sup>

As widespread ideas around the inherent inferiority of Blacks continue to inform American society, whites (and other groups) react to these dehumanizing messages and insults through the implementation of racial microaggressions.<sup>11</sup> These automatic put-downs are guided by unconscious thought and have a deleterious effect on the lives of Black people. Actions like name-calling, hair-touching, calling law enforcement for triviality, or second-guessing someone’s ability to perform in school or on the job are but a few of the relentless daily affronts (or stressors) that Blacks face.<sup>12</sup> Black people, both young and old, who endure these

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<https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/16/politics/blacks-white-racism-united-states-polls/index.html>.

9. Sarah McCammon and Alyssa Edes, “Michele Norris on the Anxiety of White America and Her Optimism for the Future,” *NPR*, Mar. 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/03/13/593243772/michele-norris-on-the-anxiety-of-white-america-and-her-optimism-for-the-future>.

10. Recently, there has been a spate of incidents caught on camera where whites have called the police on people of color who are engaging in nonthreatening, legal activities. These activities include but are not limited to golfing “too slow,” shopping for prom, touring a college campus, checking out of an Airbnb, waiting for a meeting at Starbucks, grilling at the park, selling bottled water to baseball fans, swimming at the neighborhood pool, wearing socks at the pool, and napping in a college dorm lounge.

11. Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, and Aisha M. B. Holder, “Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 39, no. 3 (2008): 329–36.

12. Chester Pierce, “Psychiatric Problems of the Black Minority,” in *American Handbook of Psychiatry*, vol. 2, edited by Silvano Arieti (New York: Basic Books,

offenses on a routine basis find themselves susceptible to racial battle fatigue (RBF).<sup>13</sup>

The fundamental premise of RBF is that the accumulation of racial insults (microaggressions) are overtaxing to the body, keeping it in a chronic state of hyperarousal.<sup>14</sup> This autonomic and uncontrollable fight, flight, or freeze response can be detrimental to psychobiological regulatory systems necessary for optimal health.<sup>15</sup> The stress hormone cortisol is well documented as a major factor in the body's response to stressful stimuli. But when cortisol remains elevated for too long, wear and tear can occur to vital organs such as the brain, kidneys, eyes, and heart.<sup>16</sup> Research has shown that Black Americans, irrespective of income or socioeconomic status, have incessantly elevated cortisol levels

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1974), 512–23; and Chester Pierce, “Stress Analogs of Racism and Sexism: Terrorism, Torture, and Disaster,” in *Mental Health, Racism, and Sexism*, edited by Charles V. Willie, Patricia Perri Rieker, Bernard M. Kramer, and Bertram S. Brown (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 277–93.

13. William A. Smith, Walter R. Allen, and Lynette L. Danley, “‘Assume the Position . . . You Fit the Description’: Psychosocial Experiences and Racial Battle Fatigue among African American Male College Students,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 4 (2007): 551–78; and William A. Smith, Man Hung, and Jeremy D. Franklin, “Racial Battle Fatigue and the *Mis*Education of Black Men: Racial Microaggressions, Societal Problems, and Environmental Stress,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 80, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 63–82.

14. William A. Smith, Man Hung, and Jeremy D. Franklin, “Between Hope and Racial Battle Fatigue: African American Men and Race-Related Stress,” *Journal of Black Masculinity* 2, no. 1 (2012): 35–58; and Bessel A. Van der Kolk, “The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress,” *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1, no. 5 (1994): 253–65.

15. Marni N. Silverman and Esther M. Sternberg, “Glucocorticoid Regulation of Inflammation and its Functional Correlates: From HPA Axis to Glucocorticoid Receptor Dysfunction,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1261, no. 1 (2012): 55–63.

16. Bruce S. McEwen, “Stress, Adaptation, and Disease: Allostasis and Allostatic Load,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 840, no. 1 (1998): 33–44.

compared to white Americans, due in part to living with white racial discrimination in all aspects of their lives.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, we know through epigenetic research that trauma and neglect can modify cellular DNA of their victims and can be carried intergenerationally to future progeny, leaving deep scars of emotional instability.<sup>18</sup> In other words, spending too much time interacting with whites can be a potential hazard to Black physical and mental health.

African Americans occupy unequal terrain alongside whites who have been socialized to devalue Black people as unthinking, lazy, incompetent, criminal, indolent, overly sexual, athletic, and much more.<sup>19</sup> These racialized images were historically crafted by elite white men as a method of social control (of the Black body) codified not only in popular culture through media representations but also in white religious thought.<sup>20</sup> In

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17. Arline T. Geronimus, Margaret Hicken, Danya Keene, and John Bound, “‘Weathering’ and Age Patterns of Allostatic Load Scores among Blacks and Whites in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 5 (2006): 826–33.

18. Marjolein V. E. Veenendaal, Rebecca C. Painter, Susanne R. de Rooij, Patrick M. M. Bossuyt, Joris A. M. van der Post, Peter D. Gluckman, Mark A. Hanson, and Tessa J. Roseboom, “Transgenerational Effects of Prenatal Exposure to the 1944–45 Dutch Famine,” *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology* 120, no. 5 (2013): 548–54; and David R. Williams, Rahwa Haile, Hector M. González, Harold Neighbors, Raymond Baser, and James S. Jackson, “The Mental Health of Black Caribbean Immigrants: Results from the National Survey of American Life,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 1 (2007): 52–59.

19. Tim Marcin, “Forty Percent of Whites Think Black People Just Need to Try Harder, Poll Finds,” *Newsweek*, Apr. 4, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/forty-percent-whites-think-black-people-just-need-try-harder-equality-poll-872646>; and Aaron Blake, “Republicans’ Views of Blacks’ Intelligence, Work Ethic Lag Behind Democrats at a Record Clip,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 31, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/03/31/the-gap-between-republicans-and-democrats-views-of-african-americans-just-hit-a-new-high>.

20. Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of*

response to these stereotypical and racist views, white people engage in unconscious bias during their interpersonal dealings with Blacks.

The long-term impact of centuries-old white racial ideology about Black people as an abomination and the ubiquitous nature of this thinking have left a stain on the Black psyche. In truth, it is not possible for a people to spend 246 years in bondage followed by one hundred years of Jim Crow choking the life out of Black progress and emerge whole from the experience. Some Black people in the LDS Church and elsewhere in the US adopt pracist,<sup>21</sup> white attitudes and understandings, accepting the white definition of Blackness, which is tantamount to an assault on Black dignity and self-love.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the expenditure of energy required to assuage white fears, prejudice, and ignorance depletes psychological reserves needed for other important, creative, and productive areas of life. In this effort, Blacks are exposed to a host of shame-related, dehumanizing interactions, chipping away at their self-worth and enabling the development of toxic, internalized self-hatred.<sup>23</sup>

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*God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

21. The term “pracist” refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, actions, and assumptions that white Americans communicate about Black people as lazy, on welfare, criminal, etc. Compliant Blacks use these same hateful views to denigrate other Blacks who are thought to be out of step with white standards.

22. Brenda Major, John F. Dovidio, Bruce G. Link, and Sarah K. Calabrese, “Stigma and Its Implications for Health: Introduction and Overview,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Stigma, Discrimination, and Health*, edited by Brenda Major, John F. Dovidio, and Bruce G. Link (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

23. Ronald E. Hall, “Self-Hate as Life Threat Pathology among Black Americans: Black Pride Antidote vis-à-vis Leukocyte Telomere Length (LTL),” *Journal of African American Studies* 18, no. 4 (2014): 398–408; and Christopher Charles, “Skin Bleaching and the Cultural Meanings of Race and Skin Color,” *Social Science Research Network*, Mar. 21, 2014, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2412800](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2412800).

## The Vulnerability to Black Internalized Oppression in Mormonism

It has been nearly half a century since the priesthood ban was removed, and still the majority of Mormons—from the elite Quorum of the Twelve to the rank-and-file members—believe in the offensively racist folk teachings of the curse of Cain that are well known in Mormon circles.<sup>24</sup> It was evident just how extensive these doctrines were embedded within the culture when in February 2012, Brigham Young University religion professor Randy Bott publicly expressed much of the old racist theology that had been in existence for over 130 years in the Church. In an interview with *Washington Post* reporter Jason Horowitz, Bott spoke of curses and marks on African peoples, invoking Genesis 9:18–27 and Abraham 1:26–27.<sup>25</sup> Randy Bott had been a towering figure at BYU for over two decades.<sup>26</sup> His instruction was highly influential on campus, which means that he was responsible for the racial indoctrination of generations of young, mostly white, Latter-day Saints.

Even though Mormon leadership quietly and publicly debunked these recursive explanations of the ban, the reality is that many white

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24. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith, eds., *Black and Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1981); and Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 1/2 (2001): 225. Note that this latter citation is from a commemorative issue of *Dialogue*; the article was originally published as Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.

25. Jason Horowitz, “The Genesis of a Church’s Stand on Race,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZXYfR\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZXYfR_story.html).

26. See Bott’s webpage, which is still posted with BYU’s department of Religious Education ([http://religion.byu.edu/randy\\_bott](http://religion.byu.edu/randy_bott)) and the Wikipedia entry for Bott’s publication record ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy\\_L.\\_Bott](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randy_L._Bott)).



Latter-day Saints (like other white folk) cannot easily shake off their inured racial prejudice. This is apparent from the 2016 Pew Research Center exit poll data that indicated that 61 percent of Latter-day Saints voted for Donald Trump even though his past and present racism was on full display throughout his campaign and current administration.<sup>27</sup> In turn, Mormon racial theology does not foster spiritual growth for people of color, but in fact is antithetical to Black group uplift. Black members rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to “speak their truth” about living in a racialized body within official Church settings, lest they be met with white resistance, fragility, and bitter defensiveness.<sup>28</sup> In situations where the normalcy of white space is merely disturbed, white people will seek to reestablish control of the discussion while silencing Blacks, leaving them deeply afflicted. Not only does this tension contribute to the development of racial battle fatigue (RBF), but it can also result in faith crisis. This psychic war will leave many Black Mormons unwittingly vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, the reverse of what religion is supposed to instill in its believers. Johnisha Demease-Williams is an African American student at Brigham Young University who decided to interview her white classmates about their racial understandings. In the twenty-five-minute short video, “The Black Student Experience—BYU,” Demease-Williams encounters and comes to understand the deep disjuncture between whites’ understandings of race and the reality she faces daily.<sup>29</sup> Experiences like this may cause

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27. Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martínez, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” Pew Research Center, Nov. 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis>.

28. Darron T. Smith, “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion: Some Personal Reflections and General Observations,” in *Black and Mormon*, 148–66.

29. Johnisha Demease-Williams, “The Black Student Experience—BYU,” Nov. 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wyx9kpDThh4>; Peggy Fletcher Stack, “It’s Not Easy Being Black at BYU, Film Shows,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Dec. 8, 2016, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=4601215&itype=CMSID>.

some Black members to renounce their faith while others, at some point, must confront this double bind and reconcile their existence within the whiteness of Mormonism.<sup>30</sup>

It is within the sacredness of this white space where Blacks who choose to remain in the faith must find meaning in their Church membership and purpose beyond racial group affiliation.<sup>31</sup> But this does not come without cost. In staying, Black Latter-day Saints must seek to compensate for their relegation and isolation in the Church. They implement cognitive strategies to deflect pain associated with the shame of rejection from their community and uncaring Church leadership as well as the ongoing racial ignorance from their well-meaning white brothers and sisters. Some rely on apologia, believing that Church authorities are fallible men who harbor unexamined prejudice. These Black members recognize that Church leaders do not have all the answers (particularly regarding racial matters) but believe that they are inspired to lead Mormonism down a righteous path nonetheless. Black apologists often employ humor, intellectualism, verbal jousting, and music to pander to the white members in efforts to mitigate the discomfort associated with existential insignificance among the LDS people.<sup>32</sup> In other instances,

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30. Internalized oppression is unavoidable in a white racist society. In order to reduce prejudice some Blacks turn their rage, frustration, fear, and powerlessness on each other. This is done through the invalidation of Black people and the Black experience. White supremacy has driven many Black folk to unwittingly attack, criticize, or have unrealistic expectations of other Blacks, particularly those willing to step forward to challenge systemic injustice. See Darron Smith, "These House-Negroes Still Think We're Cursed: Struggling against Racism in the Classroom," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2005): 439–54.

31. Elijah Anderson, "The White Space," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 10–21.

32. Trent Toone, "Sistas in Zion Are Voices of Humor and Faith on Stereotypes, Misconceptions, and All Things Mormon," *Deseret News*, Aug. 15, 2013, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865584709/Sistas-in-Zion-are-voices-of-humor-and-faith-on-stereotypes-misconceptions-and-all-things-Mormon.html>.

when racialized teachings within the Church confound human reason, these Black Mormons adopt an extreme form of self-deprecation, permitting them to deal with the uncertainty they feel with regard to their acceptance and status in Mormonism. These members tend to ignore or downplay the profound racial contradiction found within their house of worship in their role as both an insider and outsider.<sup>33</sup>

Both groups of Blacks openly sustain Church authorities as inspired mouthpieces for God while they wrestle with the troublesome narrative and widespread use of racist dogma they are left to emotionally address. But the latter group must acquiesce to white prejudice, even when Church authority is patently wrong. Put differently, these Black Mormons must accept on some level an “inferior” status to accommodate white understandings of Blackness in Mormon theology. A study by writer-researcher Jana Riess of the Religion News Service found that 70 percent of Black Latter-day Saints believe the Mormon racial folklore of themselves as a cursed lineage. Not only is this number astounding in itself, but it actually surpasses the number of white Mormons who believe in this teaching (61 percent).<sup>34</sup> More than a few prominent Black

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33. Jennifer Crocker and Brenda Major. “Social Stigma and Self-Esteem: The Self-Protective Properties of Stigma,” *Psychological Review* 96, no. 4 (1989): 608–30.

34. Jana Riess, “Forty Years On, Most Mormons Still Believe the Racist Temple Ban Was God’s Will,” *Religion News Service*, June 11, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/06/11/40-years-later-most-mormons-still-believe-the-racist-priesthood-temple-ban-was-gods-will>. The survey question asked respondents to rate the following statement as true, probably true, might be true, probably not true, or not true: “The priesthood and temple ban on members of African descent was inspired of God and was God’s will for the Church until 1978.” The numbers cited represent the first two categories added together (i.e., those who said it was true as well as those who believed it was probably true). This question appeared as one of fifteen “testimony” statements, and in that context, received the lowest scores of any other testimony question. So these numbers are high and surprising, but they are possibly higher than they would have been if the question had not been embedded in a series of other positive-response questions like “God is real” and “Joseph Smith was a prophet.”

members in North America have gone on record vocalizing these same racist sentiments.

One outspoken defender of Mormon racism is Salt Lake City attorney Keith Hamilton, an African American Latter-day Saint who wrote a memoir entitled *Last Laborer: Thoughts and Reflections of a Black Mormon*.<sup>35</sup> In the book, Hamilton states that, “Withholding the priesthood from blacks was part of God’s unfolding plan.” Despite the ban’s existence through a century and a half of racism in American history, Hamilton explains that it was “no man-made policy . . . nor a policy instituted because some white LDS Church leader(s) had concerns about black-white relations.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, he assumes the old LDS canon that Blacks were deficient enough to warrant a divine curse.<sup>37</sup> From this standpoint, Hamilton endorses the racist mythology that he was an inferior being prior to the 1978 proclamation.

Other Black Mormons have found additional ways to deflect the pain they endure at the hands of white members as a result of these extreme racist views still found in Mormon theology.<sup>38</sup> These Blacks follow many Church authorities in maintaining an aloofness and denial of white racial oppression by stating that “only God knows” the origins of the now-defunct ban. For example, Alan Cherry, another one-time well-known Black Mormon name in Utah County, was one of a hand-

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35. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Black Mormon Defends Priesthood Ban Thirty-Three Years after It Was Lifted,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 9, 2011, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=51976643&ctype=cmsid>; and Keith N. Hamilton, *Last Laborer: Thoughts and Reflections of a Black Mormon* (South Jordan, Utah: Ammon Works, 2011).

36. Quoted in Stack, “Black Mormon.”

37. Now that the Church has posted the “Race and Priesthood” essay to its official website, which points the finger at Brigham Young as the instigator of the priesthood ban, should we expect Hamilton to offer up a redaction to that section of his manuscript?

38. Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

ful of African Americans who converted to the Church and attended BYU in the 1970s before the restriction was lifted.<sup>39</sup> In an interview with the LDS-owned *Deseret News*, Cherry told a reporter, “From the very beginning my impression that came from heaven was I was not to worry about priesthood restriction.”<sup>40</sup> He continued by saying that men and women must stop looking for inequalities and injustices, and instead be happy for those who have more. Sadly, Mormon racial folklore is a primer for pro-racist attitudes and self-hate for some Blacks over time. This is evidenced in the ways in which these individuals speak and write about being Black in Zion.

### Love is Not Enough: Finding a Place in the LDS Church is Difficult

On an individual level, Black Mormons often meet with supportive white persons who truly care for their welfare. These Black members feel adoration, validation, and a sense of belonging. Though they may not experience individual racist incidents, these are but one form of racism. Unfortunately, interpersonal bias is the only example of racism that the general public acknowledges and remotely comprehends. White Americans (and some white-identified pro-racist Blacks) tend to view racism as an individual matter wherein one race has animus for the other. Such a narrow definition of white supremacy does very little to explain the stark systemic inequities (in education, healthcare, crime and punishment, etc.) that Black Americans and other Americans of color disproportionately encounter in a so-called post-racial society. Treating racism as isolated acts of meanness mystifies its pervasiveness

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39. Alan Gerald Cherry, *It's You and Me, Lord!: My Experiences as a Black Mormon* (Provo: Trilogy Arts, 1970).

40. Molly Farmer, “Having Priesthood ‘Is My Better Means to Serve,’” *Deseret News*, May 21, 2008, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705383516/Having-priesthood-is-my-better-means-to-serve.html?pg=all>.

in US society and in the Western world as a whole. It's not individual examples of bigotry, but rather a well-coordinated system founded on racist principles, practices, assumptions, policies, methods, and laws (enacted by elite white men) that creates the backdrop for Black members of the Church. Yet, Latter-day Saints as a group do not recognize this form of domination.

Instead, the faith tends to promote the "prosperity gospel," a particularly American ethos steeped in the notion that obedience translates into monetary success.<sup>41</sup> When the wealthy lives of white members are juxtaposed against the bleak life circumstances of many Black Americans, it is not hard for Black Mormons to imagine that such a comfortable lifestyle may come from keeping the commandments. Further, the nature of LDS church participation for Black people requires them to go through extraordinary measures to "assimilate" in an effort to fit in and appear "less Black," and therefore, less threatening to white people. Conflict between hyper-whiteness in the meetinghouse and the struggle for acceptance as fellow saints in society can leave many Black saints jaded, longing for acknowledgement on their own terms. This is an unjust reality for those deemed the "least of these" by white society. And such a cycle can lead to Black self-hatred as well as loathing for other Blacks, especially the poor and working class, blaming them for their circumstances in life.

The culture of whiteness, in its acutely cruel variations, encompasses every facet of US society from the criminal justice system, public school curricula, healthcare access, housing, and employment. The LDS Church, being uniquely American in the narrative of manifest destiny through Mormon pioneers' westward expansion, follows a similar trajectory. Church publications extol the virtues of white men and their dealings with Jesus, and Church leaders remain overwhelmingly white and male. Just as in mainstream American culture, whites within the

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41. See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Mormon Church have little empathy for Blacks as a group, though they make exceptions for a few token individuals (many of whom are socially white in their self-presentation). They love us when it is expedient to do so, but they fear Blackness and what it has come to embody in the despicable history of Mormon race relations. Despite the love from a few close personal Church members, Black members find Mormonism to be a place of unapologetic whites. Consequently, Black membership within the LDS Church comes at an emotional cost to those individuals.

### Can Faith Move the Mountain of White Supremacy?

For many Black Latter-day Saints who stay and practice their faith, the emphasis of the doctrines of the Mormon gospel on family and community often trump the racist past (and present). Still others have come to believe, like their white counterparts, that statements by Church leaders on controversial issues are institutionally-sanctioned pronouncements by God, when, in fact, they often reflect individual political and social bias. Thus, pointing out these inconvenient truths in the Church is akin to cultural warfare. Black Latter-day Saints spend a great deal of energy reaffirming their humanity against the conservatizing forces in the Church. And despite it all, these Black members remain optimistic and hopeful that the Lord will cause the scales to fall from the eyes of white folk and deliver them from the morass. To this end, Blacks in the Mormon Church exert much labor muddling through the rigors of racial battle fatigue, straddling two distinctly different and unequal worlds.

For decades, the Church has not forthrightly addressed its racist past despite calls to do so from many of its more progressive Black and white members. Not surprisingly, then, the Black membership in the United States is minuscule. And the reality is that a fair number of those Black members who practice Mormonism in the United States do not actually identify as African American but are first- or second-generation immigrants mainly from the West Indies, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria,

and the Congo. These low membership numbers suggest that the Church has done very little to atone for its racist past and open the door to fellowship for African Americans, who are also children of our Heavenly Father. If recompense were sincerely a principle taught from the pulpit, then we should expect no less of an apology than that shown by Pope Francis, who recently begged the indigenous native peoples of South America for forgiveness for the atrocities committed in the name of the Roman Catholic Church during the colonial era.<sup>42</sup> Is such a token gesture beneath the LDS Church? Do Black lives not matter enough to deserve the same full consideration from the LDS Church? Until these questions can be addressed with action as opposed to rhetoric, Black people have no cause to celebrate but should approach the LDS Church with measured caution, paying attention to the realities marked by race, power, and privilege.<sup>43</sup>

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42. Nicole Winfield and Frank Bajak, "Pope Francis: I'm Sorry," *US News and World Report*, July 9, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/07/09/pope-to-meet-with-workers-grass-roots-groups-in-bolivia>.

43. Darron T. Smith, *When Race, Religion, and Sport Collide: Black Athletes at BYU and Beyond* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).